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ABSTRACT

Over a period of three years an experimental program was conducted at Southwest Texas State University to help increase the number of successful completions of admission contract conditions by transfer students with low grade point averages. An increase in the number of students successfully meeting the required grade point average of approximately 3.00 on a 5.00 scale during their first semester has changed from 39% in 1976 to 62.9% in 1979. Initially, the program required special academic advising sessions plus individualized work in the learning assistance center. This plan was revised as it was noted that most of the students exhibited few academic skill deficiencies but did have a prolonged history of inappropriate academic behaviors, such as class cutting, procrastination, poor problem solving abilities, and avoidance behaviors. The existing program now provides three options: (1) a three hour elective credit course in psychology that stresses acquisition of learning strategies, (2) individualized study in the learning assistance center lab, and (3) academic improvement groups focusing on academic problem areas. Results indicate that students choosing the credit program have been far more successful in meeting the required grade point average than those choosing the non-credit program. (MKM)

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THE LAST CHANCE: A PROGRAM FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS WITH LOW GPA'S

by

Carol Dochen and De Johnson

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ABSTRACT

The results of a three year experimental program at a medium-sized state university involving more than 600 transfer students with low GPA's show an increase in the number of successful completions of admissions contract conditions from 39% to 62.9%. The paper gives an overview of the program, the extensive revisions over three years, and statistical results.

THE LAST CHANCE: A PROGRAM FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS WITH LOW GPA'S

by Carol Dochen and De Johnson

Colleges and universities desire academically successful and competent students, and entrance requirements are made to increase the likelihood of that outcome. Justifiably, admissions counselors are reluctant to admit transfer students with low GPA's; however, the results of a two year experimental program with such students at a medium-sized state university show that more than 50% can achieve GPA's greater than 2.75 in one semester.

In 1976, an effort to make the most reasonable and humane decisions regarding students requesting admissions to Southwest Texas State University resulted in the formalization of a one-semester admissions policy by the admissions office for non-qualifying transfer students who pleaded special circumstances. For two semesters, a small group of students (N=74, N=59) were accepted with the provision that they complete 12 credit hours with a specified GPA. These students were recommended to seek academic support in the university's learning assistance center. The success ratio was 39% and 45% respectively.

Dissatisfied with these results, the admissions office enlisted the aid of the university's learning assistance center and its staff. The initial conferences yielded a behavioral contract which was partially introduced in the fall of 1977. That contract required special academic advising sessions plus individualized work in the learning assistance center. The statistical results (48% completion) from that semester showed no significant increase. The admissions office and the learning assistance center, convinced of the value of this special admissions

program, began a series of revisions.

Revisions

Criteria of eligibility and GPA requirement

The first revision was a specific list of criteria to identify students who would be offered a probational contract and a corresponding formula to calculate the required GPA.

(1) Students with a GPA of 1.80 - 2.00 having less than 60 hours were automatically offered a probational contract.

(2) Students with a GPA of less than 1.80 having less than 60 hours were automatically rejected. If, and only if, a student appealed, he could be offered a probational contract if the reason for his poor academic performance was one of those listed below:

(a) "prolonged illness" - statement from attending doctor required for files.

(b) "trying to combine work and school" - (40 hours or more of work per week) - statement from employer at that time required for files.

(c) "extenuating circumstances" - such as family or drug problems. Statement from counselor, clergyman, etc. regarding presence of this situation required for files.

(d) "been out of school for over 5 years - had no goals at that time" - copy of student's transcript required for files.

(3) Students with a GPA of less than 2.00 having more than 60 hours were automatically rejected. If a student appealed, his case was reviewed and decided upon by the admissions committee.

While the intent of the GPA formula was to require that the student raise his cumulative GPA to 2.00 or better by the end of the one semester, some few students from categories 2 and 3 above were exempt from that requirement because it was mathematically impossible. These students were usually required to make a GPA from a 3.00 to a 3.50.

Training of staff

The second revision involved training the admissions staff in all of the options open to a student entering the university under a probational contract. In addition, printed materials were created by the LAC to aid students in choosing the appropriate option.

Analysis of target population

After several semesters involvement, the LAC staff realized that many of their original presumptions about these students were faulty. Instead of marginal academic students with skill deficiencies, the students in this special program exhibited the following characteristics:

Average to superior intelligence

Middle to upper social economic status

Average age of 20 to 25 years, with a range extending to 60 years

Prolonged history of inappropriate academic behaviors (class cutting, procrastination, poor problem solving abilities, avoidance behaviors)

Extremely poor study habits

Very few academic skill deficiencies and learning disabilities

This realization on the part of the LAC staff constituted the third major revision of the program as staff members searched for new means of helping these students.

The fourth and fifth revisions keyed on the special academic advising sessions designed for these students. Initially, they were briefly advised in a large group. The major topics covered were conditions of the contract and some references to campus support agencies. Several semesters followed with only minimal increases in the successful completion ratios. It became obvious to the LAC staff that some of the underlying reasons for students failing to meet the conditions of their contracts stemmed from the initial choice of courses and the resulting schedule. Therefore, the staff redesigned the advising session to include the use of small groups; usually six students to one staff member. While this structure was more useful, it was evident that some students were hostile and unresponsive to the session; so again, the advising session was revised.

The probation transfer students were congregated in a large group meeting, which the LAC director opened with brief statements regarding the philosophy of the probation transfer program and statistical results. The meeting was then turned over to a group of ex-probation transfer students, all of whom were successfully enjoying college. They recounted personal experiences and employed confrontative techniques to reach and motivate the new students. The tone of this part of the session was indicative of a revival tent or an A.A. meeting. After 20-30 minutes, the students were divided into small groups for academic advising. The LAC staff members, aided by the probation transfer volunteers and equipped with complete transcripts showing the often checkered past of these new students, conducted the groups. A marked change was immediately evident as the new students were agreeable, cooperative, and enthusiastic about the program.

To insure that the probation transfer students obtained the negotiated schedule of classes, the staff members were authorized to final check each

student's schedule before registration fees could be paid.

LAC programs

At the start of the semester, each probation transfer student became involved in one of three distinctly different programs offered by the LAC. The first program was a three hour elective credit course in Psychology stressing the acquisition of learning strategies and including a heavy emphasis on self management techniques. This course, taught by the staff, provided a powerful structure through which a student could learn to control his academic destiny. In recent semesters, the instructional staff has made special efforts to work closely with these probation transfer students.

The second program involved individualized study in the LAC lab under the supervision of paraprofessional counselors. Such work usually concentrated on study skills improvement.

The third program, Academic Improvement Groups patterned after the model built by Dr. Sue Johnson-Davidson (1), was the latest addition to the list of options. AIG's were designed to help students focus on academic problem areas, learn techniques to develop skills to overcome the problems, recognize how these skills transfer to other problem areas, practice applying the techniques, and continue developing skills throughout the academic year.

By the end of Fall 1979, it became obvious that students choosing the credit program were far more successful in meeting the conditions of their contracts than those choosing the non-credit program (see Table 1). In an effort to eliminate this inequity, the LAC is currently devoting the efforts of one senior psychology intern (an ex-probation transfer student herself) to counsel with and supervise the students in this program, both credit and non-credit. This intern is available for walk-in conferences, and she also

Table 1

Results From Probation Transfer Program

Total N = 626	% students choosing	% students meeting contract	Total % students meeting contract
Fall 1976 (N=74)	N/A	39	39
Spring 1977 (N=59)	N/A	45	45
Fall 1977 (N=105)	N/A	48	48
Spring 1978 (N=80)	class 43 lab 57	54 43	51
Summer 1978 (N=11)	N/A	72.7	72.7
Fall 1978 (N=112)	class 41 lab 59	58.5 55	57
Spring 1979 (N=22)	class 66 lab 34	69.7 23.5	51
Summer 1979 (N=22)	N/A	59	59
Fall 1979 (N=108)	class 61 lab 39	76.5 39	62.9

Average GPA of students meeting conditions of contract 2.94

Average GPA range of students meeting conditions of contract 2.09 - 4.00

Average GPA of students not meeting conditions of contract 1.58

Average GPA range of students not meeting conditions of contract .49 - 2.70

No relationship found between number of hours transferred and success in meeting conditions of contract.

has two scheduled appointments with each student during the semester. The results of this revision are as yet unknown.

Projected revisions

The LAC staff recently became aware that probation transfer students required to make a GPA greater than 3.00 were suffering extremely high stress levels. For these students the contract seemed to be punitive, not motivating. Therefore, the staff has recommended that a ceiling of 2.75 be utilized on the contract no matter what the entering GPA and the number of hours.

Statistical results

Since this report is merely descriptive, not a formal experimental design, it is appropriate to be extremely cautious in interpreting any results. No one knows the acceptable level of success, and many students who fail to complete their contracts achieve outstanding improvements in self awareness and decision-making. For many of those "failures", the contract forces them to the realization that college is an inappropriate choice for them, at least at this time.

When looking at the data presented in Table 1, the LAC staff believes the revisions cited earlier account for the marked increase in the number of students meeting the conditions of their contracts. From Fall 1976 to Fall 1979, the increase from 39% to 62.9% is probably not due to chance.

The other general trend is the higher success rate of students choosing the credit rather than the non-credit program. The increase in the number of students in the credit program who successfully complete their contracts may be explained by the extra attention the instructional staff now gives them or be a factor of the type of student choosing the credit program.

The most important statistical result not reflected in the table is the bipolar distribution of the students' GPA's. In some cases the old behaviors of class cutting and procrastination recur. Fascinatingly, the most confident even arrogant students at the advising sessions usually end up with a GPA of less than 1.00.

On the other end of the scale, many students score GPA's above 3.00 and continue that level of performance through graduation (and graduate school). A follow-up study is planned.

Evaluation

While statistical results may yield interesting information, the really important feedback comes from the participants in the program in one of two ways: individual conferences and written, subjective evaluations. Many of the revisions have been a direct result of those evaluations.

The following list of questions is currently being used on the written evaluation.

1. What are your feelings about being labeled "probation transfer"? Include problems and assets you found associated with that title.
2. Evaluate the usefulness of the LAC special advising session you attended before registration. Include your reaction to the probation transfer volunteers and the course advising you received.
3. What will you be doing next semester if you fulfill your probation transfer contract?
4. What will you be doing next semester if you do not fulfill your probation transfer contract?
5. For future students entering under the probation transfer program, what improvements should be made to upgrade the quality of assistance?
6. Which option were you involved in? ___ Psy 1320 ___ 15 hours work in the LAC lab ___ AIG

Answer the following questions only if you chose the 15 hours of work in the LAC lab.

7. How was the time you spent working in the LAC lab meaningful to you?

8. Would it have been helpful if your lab work had been more structured?

Summary

This experimental program has two basic premises. First, some transfer students with low, even disastrous, GPA's can and should be academically successful. Second, if these students are indeed given "a last chance," then that chance should include more than an opportunity to register for classes. Some real efforts to help the student unearth the reasons for his past failures and build new methods for successful academic experiences should be made.

References

1. Johnson-Davidson, S. & McCarty, C. Academic improvement group facilitator manual. San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1977.